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ABSTRACT

Error pattern analysis is a teaching technique that emphasizes identifying, classifying, and keeping a frequency count on only those errors actually occurring in students' writing. Application of error pattern analysis in a workshop format requires three steps: preparing an error pattern analysis, teaching from this analysis, and integrating it into the workshop format. Three samples from a student are usually enough to determine his or her error patterns; in a whole class, there probably will not be more than 20 to 30 types of errors. After compiling error pattern analysis charts for the class as a whole, the teacher can focus work in mechanics precisely where the students need it. Error pattern analysis can be integrated into the workshop format at the point where students edit each other's rough drafts. In this way, rudimentary editing skills and mechanics are learned simultaneously, while students also learn to interact cooperatively. In effect, students become their own teachers. (JL)

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ERROR PATTERN ANALYSIS IN A WORKSHOP FORMAT

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Error pattern analysis in a workshop format helps technical writing students achieve competence in mechanics. Error pattern analysis involves identifying, classifying, and keeping a frequency count on only those errors actually occurring in students' writing. Using error pattern analysis in the technical writing workshop requires three steps: preparing the error pattern analysis, teaching mechanics from the error pattern analysis, and integrating error pattern analysis into the workshop format. Its application makes students their own editors--and their own teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Julie Stusrud Held and Margaret Goodman Burns suggest that technical writing is best taught in a workshop format that emphasizes the writing process and fosters a positive atmosphere (1, 2). After reviewing considerable research, the authors also indicate that the teaching of traditional grammar and other forms of mechanics has no significant effect on students' writing skills. Many instructors who have taught writing courses know all too well the truth in Held and Burns' statement.

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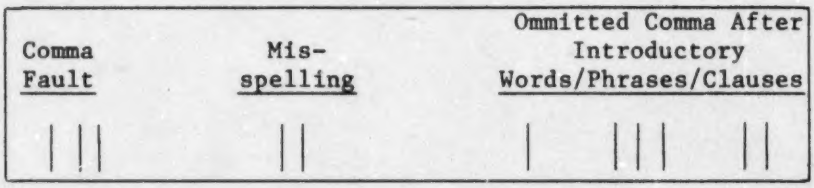
However, technical writing students realize the importance of competent mechanics in their writing, and technical writing teachers also realize that mastery of mechanics must still be acquired, despite the ineffectiveness of traditional teaching methods. The question, then, is how this competence can be gained in the most effective and efficient manner. Our answer is to integrate the teaching of mechanics into the workshop format recommended by Held and Burns and to focus only on the errors students actually make, by using a technique called error pattern analysis. Error pattern analysis emphasizes identifying, classifying, and keeping a frequency count on only those errors actually occurring in students' writing. Students are thus able to recognize their individual pattern or errors and also to recognize their need to overcome these errors.

HOW TO USE ERROR PATTERN ANALYSIS IN THE TECHNICAL WRITING WORKSHOP

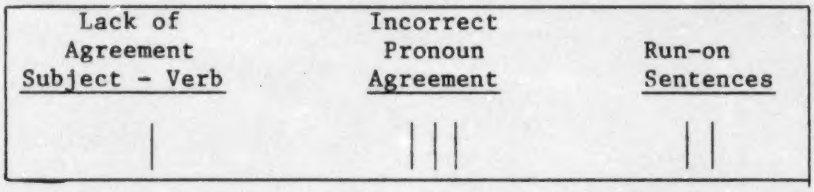
Application of error pattern analysis in the workshop format requires three steps: preparing an error pattern analysis, teaching from this error pattern analysis, and integrating it into the workshop format.

Preparing the Error Pattern Analysis

The instructor should begin by identifying errors in a student's writings. Three samples from a student are usually sufficient to determine the particular pattern of error. After identifying these errors, the instructor classifies and maintains a frequency count on the errors as they appear in the student's writings. An abbreviated error pattern analysis chart for Student A might look something like the following:



For Student B, the error pattern analysis chart might look something like the following:



After completing error pattern analyses on each student's writings, the instructor combines the analyses into a master error pattern analysis chart, which reflects the errors of the class as a whole. Surprisingly enough, the instructor will discover that the types of errors students make are restricted in number; for an entire class the number will range from 20 to 30 types of errors. Having used error pattern analysis as a tool to teach mechanics for several years, I have found that certain errors will appear year after year. Among these frequently occurring errors will be such things as the run-on sentence, incorrectly placed or omitted commas, lack of subject-verb agreement, omission of contractive and possessive apostrophes, comma faults, overcapitalization or undercapitalization, misspelling, and omission of colon for lists and definitions.

The value to the instructor in compiling individuals error pattern analysis charts for the class as a whole is that they allow the instructor to focus on only those errors in mechanics that students are actually making. In effect, the instructor is teaching to error, which, because it

concentrates only on those errors which students actually make, is an efficient method for solving problems with mechanics.

Teaching Mechanics From Error Pattern Analysis

After combining individual errors into a master chart for the class as a whole, the instructor can use this chart to focus instruction on mechanics. While Student A is having trouble with comma faults and omitted commas, Student B has problems with pronoun agreement. Thus, the instructor can concentrate on the principles of correct commas usage and pronoun agreement.

Besides recommending review of the principles of correct usage that the master chart indicates students need, I also recommend that students create sentences featuring these errors and that they then correct them. Frequently, I have students create the comma fault and then correct the fault with proper punctuation. Because students cannot create either the incorrect example or the corrected example without understanding the principle behind the error, this exercise provides a litmus test of their comprehension.

Integrating Error Pattern Analysis into the Workshop Format

In a workshop format, small groups of three and four students work together closely. After completing a rough draft of a piece of writing, such as a mechanism description, each student submits a copy of the rough draft to the other students in the workshop. Error pattern analysis can be integrated into the workshop very easily at this point. In workshop each student can edit for mechanical errors and prepare individual error pattern sheets for these drafts. Needless to say, the novice editor does not

identify every error. However, two other students in the group may identify what is overlooked.

Making Students Their Own Editors

The most important thing is that using error pattern analysis during the rough draft stage of writing offers several unique advantages. Rudimentary editing skills are being developed while mechanics are simultaneously being taught. Further, students learn to interact with one another, cooperatively, thus fostering the positive atmosphere recommended by Held and Burns.

After each student integrates the results of the error pattern analysis done by the other students in the rough draft stage, the final product is submitted to the instructor for grading. Another opportunity is now provided to focus students' attention on their mechanical errors and reinforce the need to eliminate these errors. The instructor can circle errors on the final product and require each student to prepare an error pattern analysis.

CONCLUSION

Using error pattern analysis in the workshop format is an efficient and effective way to integrate instruction in mechanics into a technical writing class. The student is taught the principles of competent mechanics by the instructor. Using these principles, students can edit each other's papers in the rough draft stage of the writing process. In the final product stage, students act as their own editors by preparing error pattern analysis charts for their own writing. Instruction in and exposure to mechanics is

thus coming from three sources: the instructor, other students, and the student writers themselves.

Because the focus is only on those errors actually occurring in students' writing, error pattern analysis is a time-saving method for learning mechanics. Because students see and edit errors in each other's writing, writing anxiety is decreased, confidence is nurtured, and a positive atmosphere is created. Finally, because students are editing for errors in every piece of writing done in their workshops, competence in mechanics is built at a more rapid rate than is possible in the more traditional models of instruction.

In effect, students are becoming their own teachers. And ultimately, this is the objective of all teaching, that the student become adept enough to no longer require an instructor.

REFERENCES

1. Held, Julie Stusrud, and Burns, Margaret Goodman, "Research in Writing: Implications for Future Technical Writing Courses," International Council for Technical Communication (INTECOM) FORUM '80, Lillehammer, Norway, August 1980.
2. For related papers also see Richardson, Marie; Fulbright, Diane H.; and Kelley, Patrick M., "Charting the Course for Technical Communication Courses: English 218, Technical and Professional Communication, at New Mexico State University," and Allen, O. Jane, "Charting the Course for Technical Communication Courses: English 318, Advanced Technical and Professional Communication, at New Mexico State University," in these Proceedings.